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An Analysis of the Special Landing Force during the Vietnam War from 1965 to 1969

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Executive Summary

Title: An Analysis of the Special Landing Force during the Vietnam War from 1965 to 1969

Author: Major Edward Thomas Nevglowski, Sr., USMC

Thesis: Amphibious operations, particularly those of the Special Landing Force (SLF), contributed significantly to the United States Military Assistance Command Vietnam's (USMACV) operational mobility and flexibility by providing timely striking power ashore and from the sea, all of which are essential characteristics of naval campaigns in support of ground operations.

Discussion: From 1965 to 1969, the United States Marine Corps contributed to the overall strategy ashore in South Vietnam by using amphibious operations conducted by the SLF. Formed around an infantry battalion landing team, a composite helicopter squadron, and naval surface assault craft, the SLF complemented large unit operations ashore as an exploitation force or as the operational reserve prepositioned on amphibious ready group (ARG) shipping. In support of daily operations ashore, the SLF conducted amphibious assaults and raids targeting Vietcong infiltration routes and buildup of enemy stockpiles in South Vietnam, and denied the establishment of permanent coastal safe havens. Whether supporting conventional or pacification operations, the flexibility and mobility of the SLF ensured operational commanders possessed a viable option to exploit success in a time-competitive environment typical of the Vietnam War. Although the concept had its benefits, it was not without problems as amphibious doctrine, command relationships, and operational employment debates often undermined the success of the SLF.

Conclusion: The amphibious capability provided by the United States Marine Corps' SLF reduced the Vietcong's control over the South Vietnamese coastal population, prevented the North Vietnamese Army from exploiting tactical success, and disrupted the North Vietnamese Army and Vietcong's freedom of action in South Vietnam.

DISCLAIMER

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Preface

An Analysis of the Employment of the Special Landing Force during the Vietnam War from 1965 to 1969, based on previously classified documents prepared by the III Marine Amphibious Force and the Marine Corps History and Museums Division, describes the purpose, utility, and history of the Special Landing Force and, in many ways, amphibious operations during the height of the Vietnam War. Official unit command chronologies, combat after-action reports, personal interviews, and post-operational synopsis stored at the Library of the Marine Corps' Historical Archives and Special Collections Section serve as the framework for this study.

Amphibious operations are the backbone of the Marine Corps' contribution to the security of United States' interests overseas, and, in a large part, the American way of war. As a maritime nation, the United States must possess a force capable of conducting offensive operations from the sea and in support of an operational campaign (design). The Marine Corps has been that force since the early 20th Century, from the first advance base force exercise on Culebra in 1902 to the Inchon landing in 1950. Even before Inchon, skeptics labeled amphibious operations and the Navy-Marine Corps team as tools of the past, insignificant in the post-World War II nuclear age. Had it not been for several Navy and Marine Corps veterans of amphibious landings in World War II and Korea, the early United States military commitment in South Vietnam would have added to this skepticism.

SLF operations during the Vietnam War gave new life to an already proven concept. The advent of helicopters and vertical envelopment maneuver changed the art of amphibious warfare and enhanced its effectiveness and utility for the next generation of warfare. In the conventional arena SLF operations epitomized the art of mobility and the element of surprise in military

operations, enabling commanders to employ mass against time sensitive requirements. In support of pacification operations, the SLF provided commanders with an enduring presence, something North Vietnamese forces could neither predict nor defend against. If nothing else, SLF operations provided the Navy and Marine Corps with a glimpse of what future naval campaigns might entail, particularly in a destabilized post-Cold War era.

The process of researching, collecting, evaluating, and writing this paper has been both a personally satisfying experience and professionally rewarding endeavor. I am sincerely indebted to my wife, Autumn; son, Edward Jr.; and dogs, Hoosier and Hanna, for their patience, support, and understanding. Without them, completion of this project would not have been possible. I am also indebted to Major General Donald R. Gardner, USMC (Ret), President, Marine Corps University; Brigadier General Thomas V. Draude, USMC (Ret), President, Marine Corps University Foundation; and Dr. Mark A. Moyar, Dr. John W. Gordon, Colonel, USMCR (Ret), and Lieutenant Colonel James H. Davis, USMC (Ret) of Marine Corps Command and Staff College for their service, counsel, and advice. I also appreciate the assistance of the Library of the Marine Corps' Historical Archives and Special Collections Section, whose patience and professional knowledge played a significant role in my education as a researcher and writer. Most of all, I am forever grateful to my cousin and posthumous Navy Cross recipient, Lance Corporal Edward S. Day. Killed in action on August 26, 1968, in one of the many intense large unit operations supported by the SLF in the northern Quang Tri Province, he epitomized the determination and sacrifice that we can only hope to understand.

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Note: The length of this study, excluding imbedded figures, is 20 pages of text.

INTRODUCTION

U.S. Marines in Vietnam

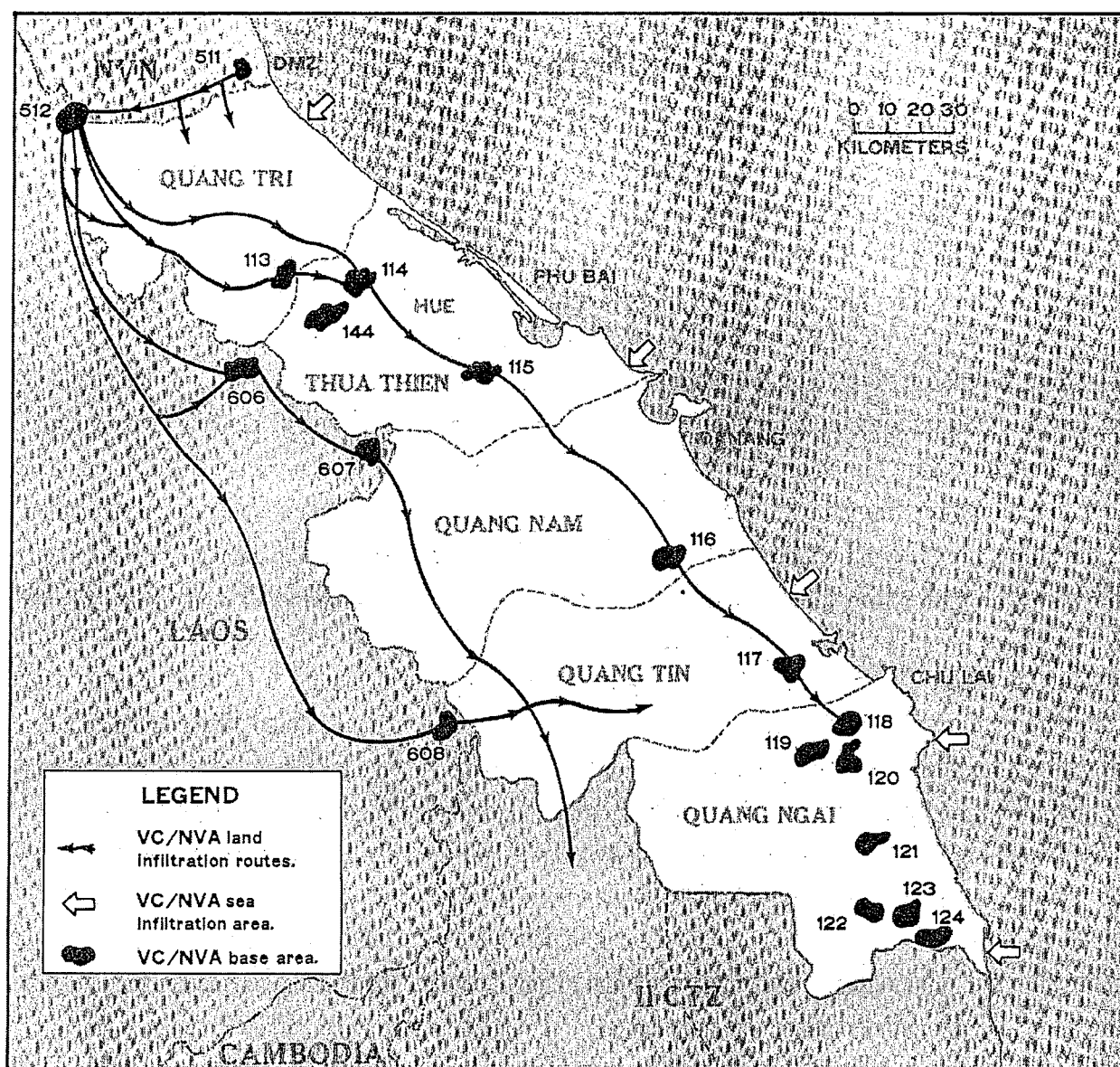
Following the 9th Marine Expeditionary Brigade's (9th MEB) amphibious landing near Da Nang, South Vietnam, in March 1965, the Commanding General, Fleet Marine Forces, Pacific (CGFMFPac) Lieutenant General Victor H. Krulak, and his naval counterpart, the Commander-in-Chief, Pacific Fleet (CINCPACFLT), outlined the advantages of an amphibious capability to support USMACV's operations against North Vietnam. All three commands acknowledged the benefits of a force dedicated for amphibious raids, assaults, and service as a floating reserve. By 1969, the Special Landing Force (SLF) had conducted more than sixty-two amphibious landings and numerous amphibious-related operations against Vietcong and North Vietnamese Army (NVA) forces in South Vietnam.¹ Amphibious operations, particularly those of the SLF, contributed significantly to USMACV's operational mobility and flexibility by providing timely striking power ashore and from the sea, all of which are relevant characteristics for the planning and execution of present day naval campaigns to support ground operations.

The Special Landing Force

The initial concept for amphibious operations and the employment of the SLF gained momentum immediately after the Marines landed in South Vietnam. As early as 14 March, CINCPACFLT and General William C. Westmoreland, Commander, USMACV (COMUSMACV), circulated the prospects of adding an amphibious component to support Operation MARKET TIME, a naval surveillance campaign targeting Vietcong infiltration routes along the South Vietnamese coast.² (See Figure 1) The opportunity to enhance existing amphibious capabilities with a concept that kept Marines and ships together long after MARKET TIME was of great interest to USMACV and III MAF. The CINCPACFLT contingency task group, comprised of a task organized Marine air-ground team deployed in the Pacific aboard

amphibious ready group (ARG) shipping, seemed to be the most viable option to support MARKET TIME and follow-on operations requiring an amphibious force. Since 1960, the Marine Corps and Navy had maintained a combined strategic contingency force that covered the Western Pacific and Indian Oceans.³ Like their Sixth Fleet counterparts in the Mediterranean, the contingency task group conducted naval and ground exercises with Asian allies to strengthen military ties in the Pacific and increase readiness in the volatile region.

Tasked to provide recommendations for amphibious operations in South Vietnam, Brigadier General Frederick J. Karch, Commanding General, 9th MEB identified the SLF as the best method for exploiting future successes ashore. SLF amphibious operations provide the greatest amount of flexibility, surprise, and maneuver for light infantry forces. Another benefit of the task group was its self-sustaining character, which contrasted with many of the ground-based forces that relied on various functional organizations for heavy and medium helicopter lift, logistics, fire support and medical triage capabilities. Provided that amphibious operations did not preclude the SLF from performing its primary function as the Pacific contingency task group, 9th MEB received full concurrence from CINCPACFLT and Lieutenant General Krulak to request the SLF. However, operational and tactical mission considerations, command relationships, and employment restrictions had to be resolved before committing the SLF to operations ashore.



Map courtesy of the Archives and Special Collections, Library of the Marine Corps

Figure 1: Map of Vietcong and NVA Infiltration Network and Base Areas, 1965-1969

OPERATIONAL RESPONSIBILITIES AND COMMAND RELATIONSHIPS

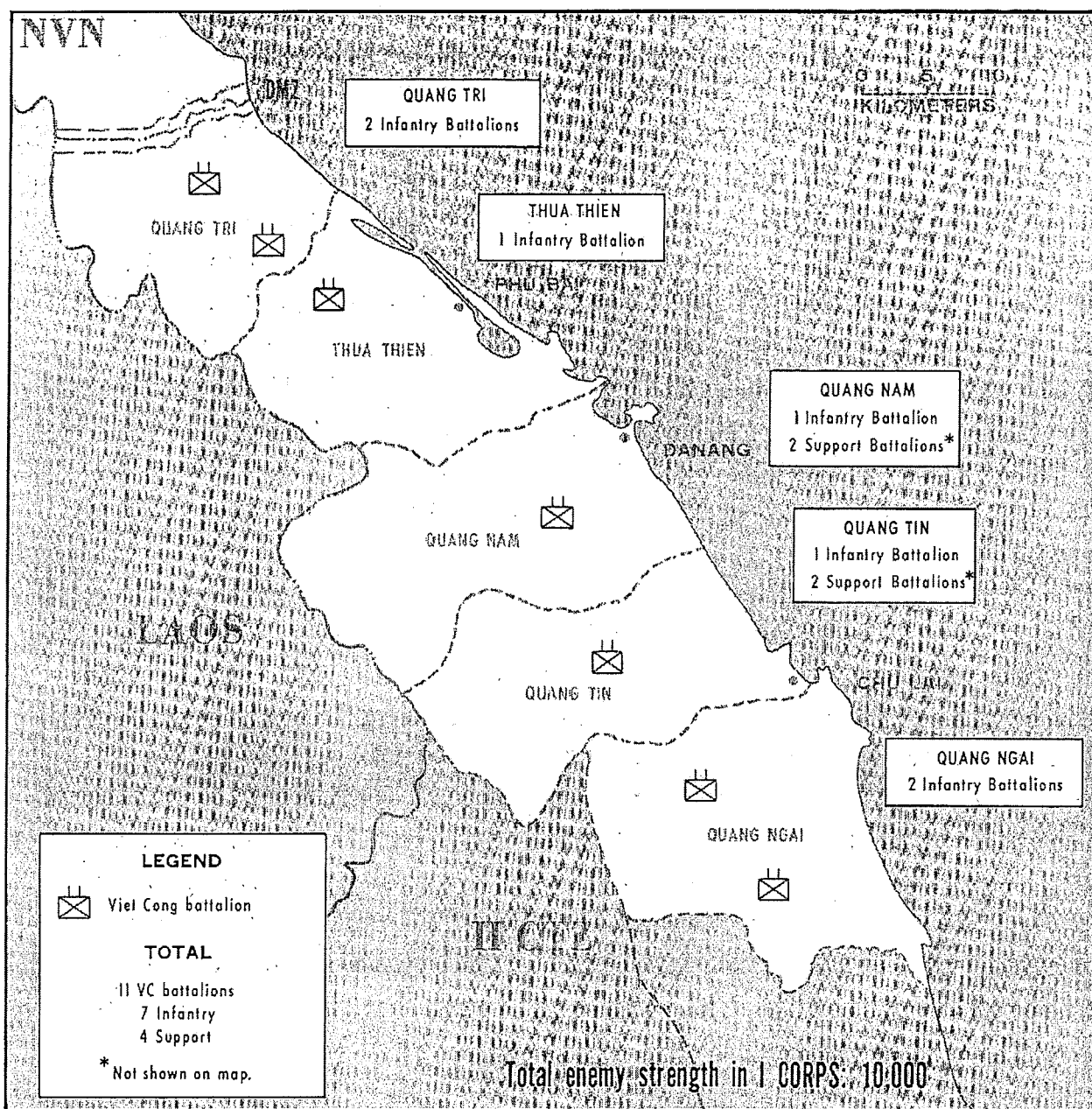
Coastal Geography and the Population

The geographic, political, and economic factors consuming South Vietnam in 1965 made it the ideal environment for the Marine Corps, amphibious operations, and the SLF. The arrival of 9th MEB was General Westmoreland's first step to counter deeply-entrenched Vietcong regulars, particularly along the coast of the five provinces of the northern-most tactical zone

identified as the I Corps Tactical Zone (ICTZ) and the northern province of the II Corps Tactical Zone (IICTZ). South Vietnam's coast, stretching from the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) with North Vietnam to the southern tip of South Vietnam proper, accounted for 600 miles of agriculturally fertile and heavily populated lowlands.⁴ (See Figure 2) These littorals made South Vietnam's coastline a promising target for the Vietcong and the communist peasant uprising attempting to reunite the two Vietnams. To undermine South Vietnam's democratic government, the Vietcong targeted the population through intimidation, pacification, and its agricultural base, which represented the economic wealth of South Vietnam. These populated areas constituted critical support nodes for the Vietcong and became logistics concentration points to supply Vietcong, and eventually, NVA operations south of the DMZ.

The SLF Mission

Not initially tasked with operating within these populated areas, or conducting counterinsurgency operations, the 9th MEB received the first significant change to its mission in South Vietnam when USMACV directed Marines to "undertake in accordance with RVN [South Vietnam] I Corps, an intensifying program of offensive operations to fix and destroy the VC [Vietcong] in the general Da Nang area."⁵ The changing mission also brought about a change in the 9th MEB's force structure in South Vietnam. Arriving with additional Marines in May, III Marine Amphibious Force replaced the 9th MEB as the lead operational Marine command and outlined its operational campaign against more than 2,000 Vietcong positioned near Da Nang, an enemy roughly half the size of the III MAF.⁶



Map courtesy of the Archives and Special Collections, Library of the Marine Corps

Figure 2: Map of Vietcong Battalions in the ICTZ, 1965

To deny the Vietcong control of the population, agriculture, and economy, the III MAF Commanding General, Major General Lewis H. Walt, directed operations to pacify the South Vietnamese population and, if required, defeat Vietcong forces to prevent the Vietcong's interference with III MAF's overall pacification campaign, keep the Vietcong off balance, and deny the Vietcong access to the coastal areas in strength.⁷ As long as they remained in the

populated areas, Walt assessed the Vietcong as highly vulnerable to SLF amphibious operations at any time. Aboard ARG shipping, the SLF remained out of Vietcong observation and detection and could transit South Vietnam's 400-mile stretch of coastline on a given day.⁸ The Vietcong's disposition, coupled with the SLF option, provided III MAF with a tailor-made scenario to demonstrate its flexibility and mobility through a permanent amphibious and striking capability in South Vietnam.

Command Relationships

The command relationships between the SLF and the Navy's Pacific operational commands created a contentious environment from the start. Throughout the war, the SLF retained an operational and administrative chain of command when not employed in South Vietnam. When assigned to support operations in South Vietnam, the SLF followed a separate operational chain of command. (See Figure 3) For example, the SLF and ARG task group remained subordinate to the Seventh Fleet when exercising contingency requirements, although the 9th MEB, subordinate to Lieutenant General Krulak, still provided administrative support to SLF units. In turn, the Seventh Fleet reported directly to the CINCPACFLT for operational purposes. When positioned off the coast of South Vietnam, CINCPACFLT retained operational control of both the SLF and ARG task group until specifically requested by General Westmoreland. During operations ashore, the SLF came under the operational control of either Westmoreland or III MAF, dependent upon the mission and operational requirements.⁹

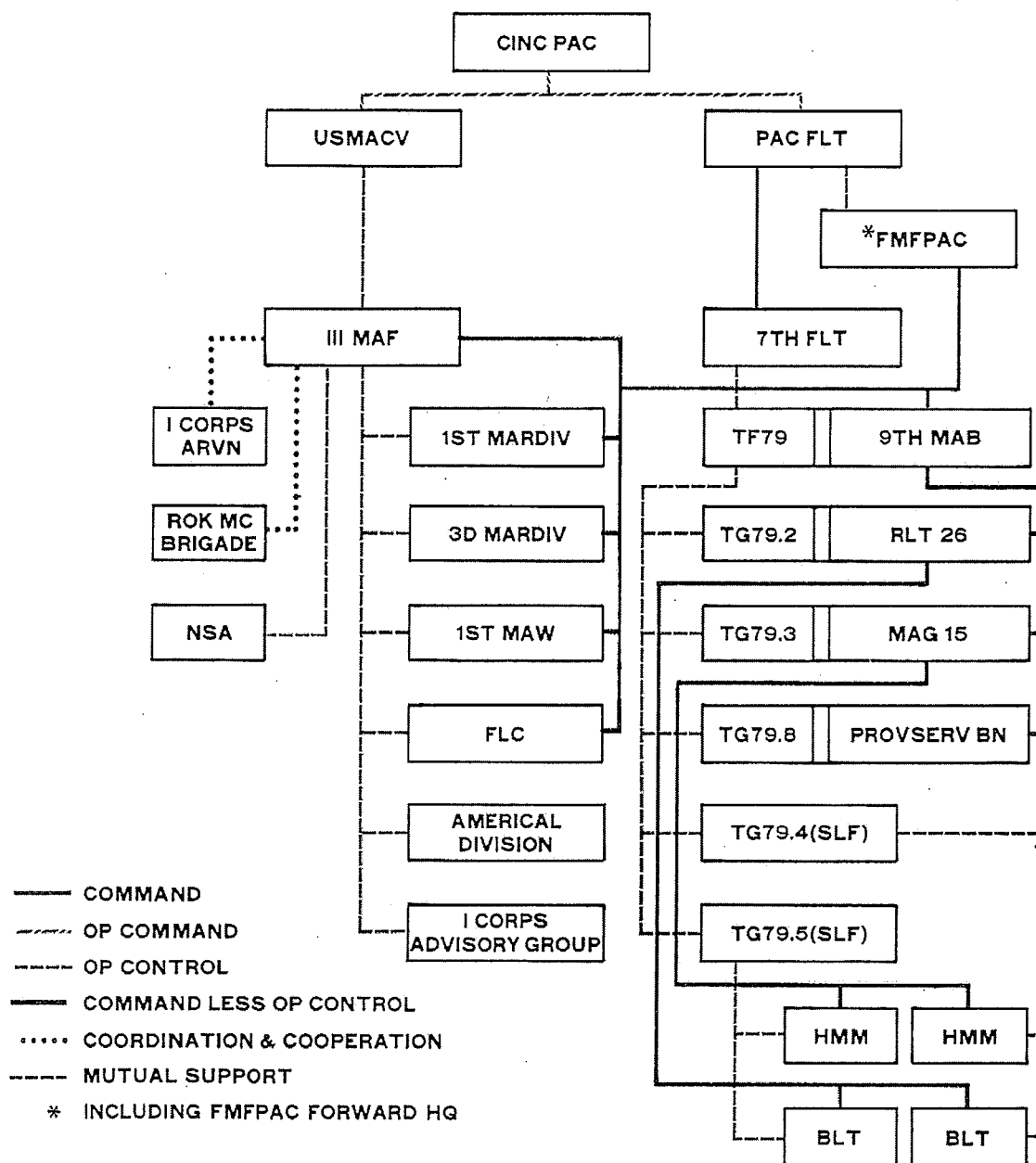


Figure 3: Typical Pacific Command Relationships, 1965-1969

Diagram courtesy of the Archives and Special Collections, Library of the Marine Corps

The SLF command relationships, both convoluted and confusing, ensured the primary purpose and integrity of the task group remained intact and were in keeping with CINCPACFLT's directive for the justifiable use of naval forces off South Vietnam. Debates internal to III MAF and debates between III MAF and USMACV created tension along Navy

and Marine Corps lines in terms of the appropriate use of amphibious forces in support of USMACV operations. Aside from its contingency force requirements, Navy officials were in favor of employing amphibious forces and the SLF as a floating reserve capable of using the South China Sea as maneuver space to strike when and where it was most necessary. However, Lieutenant General Krulak viewed the debate as an issue of responsiveness to both CINCPACFLT and General Westmoreland's needs. There was also little evidence to support CINCPACFLT's need for a Pacific contingency force, especially one assigned to a higher priority than ongoing operations in South Vietnam. The only two occasions warranting the use of a contingency force were the 1962 communist uprising in Laos and the attempted communist coup in Indonesia in 1965.¹⁰ The Indonesian coup coincided with the first use of the SLF during Operation DAGGER THRUST, which fueled CINCPACFLT's insistence on the need for a ready contingency force. The issue of operational priority, although resolved in 1965, continued to resurface throughout the next five years of operations.

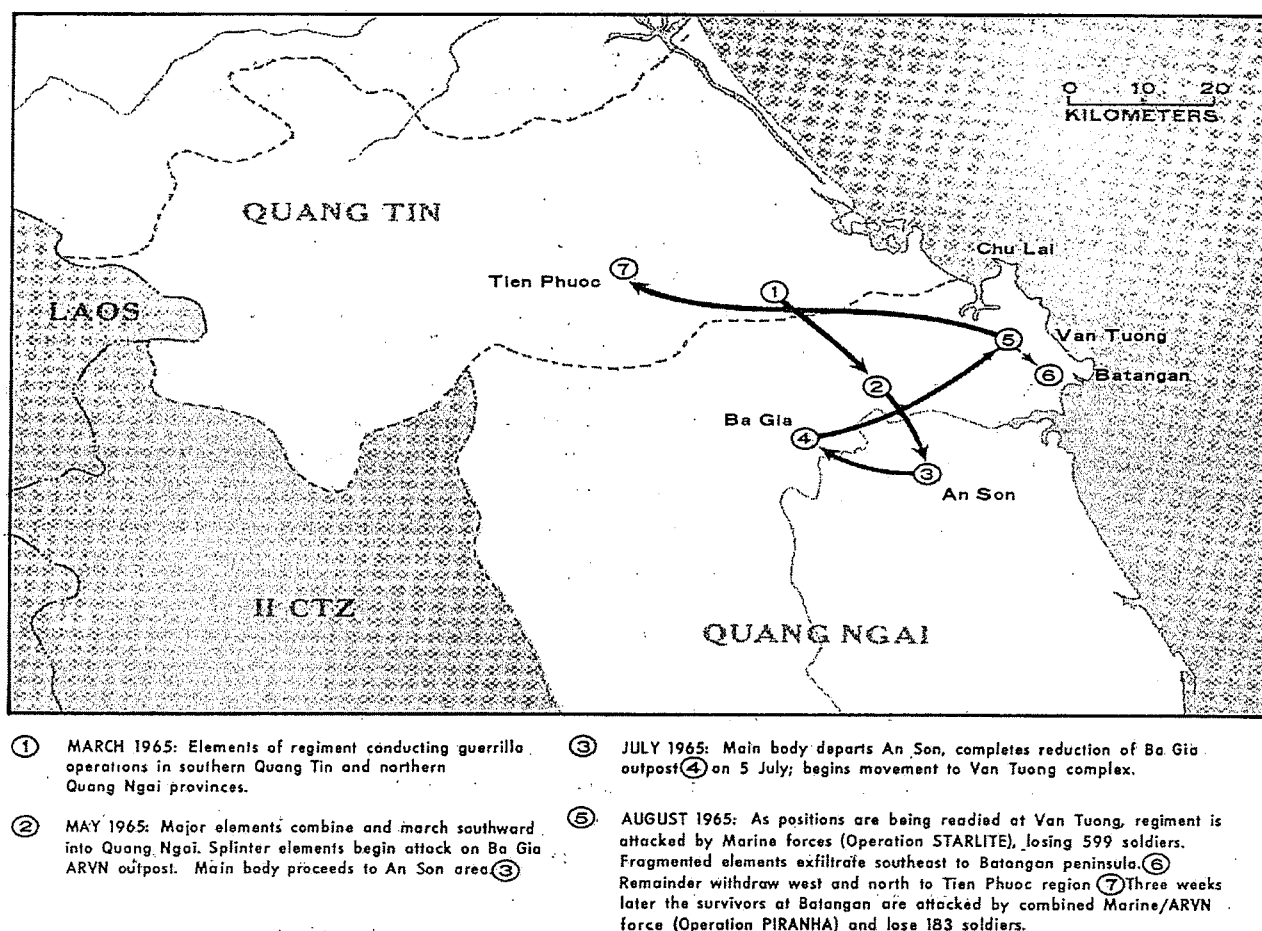
1965: EARLY OPERATIONS AND ASSESSMENTS

Qui Nhon

Major General Walt wasted little time planning for SLF support for large unit operations in 1965. Walt received even better news when the decision to fill SLF requirements with a battalion from the Okinawa-based 9th MEB relieved him of supporting the SLF requirement with a battalion deployed to South Vietnam.¹¹ Although the change would not take effect for several months, it enabled Walt to maintain his authorized strength ashore and gain one additional battalion via the SLF, as long as any request consisted of an appropriate task for the SLF and for a limited time. III MAF immediately drafted operational plans to ensure the SLF remained off the coast for use in a variety of roles and operations.

In June 1965, USMACV faced a growing dilemma over the timing and arrival of United States Army forces and Free World ground forces from South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand, and adequate security of military installations in South Vietnam, particularly in Qui Nhon where an increasingly significant Vietcong presence threatened the arrival of USMACV forces.¹² Qui Nhon was also the location of the Army's main logistics base supporting operations in the Central Highlands. To reduce the build up of Vietcong forces in the Qui Nhon region, USMACV tasked III MAF to plan for operations until the Army established enough combat power in the region.

Eager to put the task group to use, III MAF requested the SLF in advance of a permanent Marine force at Qui Nhon. Located along the coast southwest of Da Nang, Qui Nhon contained a large population base with extensive agricultural potential, making it a favorable target for Vietcong forces. Like several of the coastal enclaves, the area around Qui Nhon was also a major base area for the Vietcong and NVA. Alerted to the operations while transiting the South China Sea from Okinawa, the SLF arrived off the coast of Qui Nhon less than three days later, conducted a heliborne assault into the highlands overlooking Qui Nhon, and established a presence inside the populated areas.¹³ The timing of the operation could not have come at a better time, catching the Vietcong in the process of adjusting forces in the area. The SLF's unimpeded movement into Qui Nhon facilitated the gathering of intelligence on Vietcong movement patterns and gave III MAF the opportunity to test several of its pacification techniques with the local populace. (See Figure 4) After three uneventful days, the SLF returned to the ARG as the floating reserve for ongoing operations. The Qui Nhon operation, however uneventful, demonstrated the flexibility and responsiveness of the task group, and the SLF's ability to seize limited amphibious objectives in support of a larger operation.



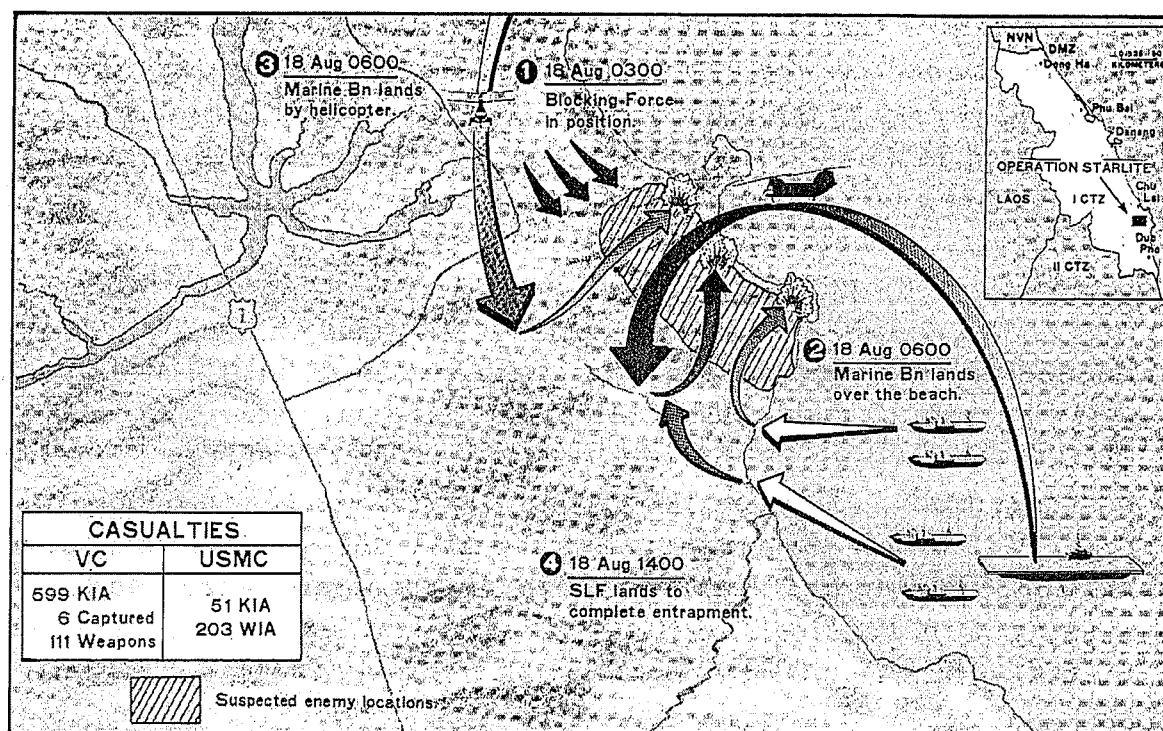
Map courtesy of the Archives and Special Collections, Library of the Marine Corps

Figure 4: Map of Vietcong Movement Patterns, 1965

First Contact: Operation STARLIGHT

Shorter after the Qui Nhon, Major General Walt again requested the SLF to support Operation STARLIGHT, scheduled for August 1965. STARLIGHT originated as a result of intelligence reports indicating an increased Vietcong presence and suspected attack on the naval logistics base at Chu Lai, south of Da Nang.¹⁴ The goal of the operation was to fix and destroy the 1st Vietcong Regiment arrayed along the coast, with the SLF serving as Walt's floating reserve. (See Figure 5) The operation called for several Marine battalions to sweep from north to south pushing the Vietcong from its positions. If necessary, Walt could use the SLF to trap Vietcong forces fleeing west. During the first day of STARLIGHT, the SLF landed from ARG

shipping undetected, trapping and killing an undetermined number of Vietcong forces in a combined surface and heliborne assault.¹⁵ An essential supporting element in STARLIGHT, the SLF demonstrated unmatched flexibility and responsiveness throughout the operation. Ashore less than a week, the SLF returned to the ARG and prepared for their next assignment.



Map courtesy of the Archives and Special Collections, Library of the Marine Corps

Figure 5: Operation STARLIGHT, 1965

Operations DAGGER THRUST and HARVEST MOON

Rejoining the task group, the SLF finally received the task of supporting the long-awaited amphibious phase of Operation MARKET TIME. In July, CINCPACFLT approved Operation DAGGER THRUST as a supporting effort to MARKET TIME. DAGGER THRUST consisted of a series of amphibious raids on “suspected enemy concentration points” along South Vietnam’s coast that lasted from September to December.¹⁶ The DAGGER THRUST series netted little in terms of enemy contact. Of the five DAGGER THRUST operations planned for

and executed, only two involved significant contact with Vietcong forces while the remaining three uncovered several bunker complexes and weapons caches.¹⁷ The SLF concept, however, proved to be a valid approach to keeping the Vietcong and NVA guessing as to where the next landing would take place. Lieutenant General Krulak declared that the DAGGER THRUST operations "caused VC in the area to move" and that "the full impact of these benefits has not been realized."¹⁸ In contrast to earlier SLF operations, DAGGER THRUST capitalized on the task group's ability to move undetected along the coast, to conduct limited actions ashore, and the ability to return to the ARG expediently. If necessary, the SLF could immediately reform and respond to enemy reaction to DAGGER THRUST, or transit the coast en route to the next objective.

Following six months of amphibious raids along the coast, the SLF came ashore in support of Operation HARVEST MOON to reduce the remnants of the 1st Vietcong Regiment. Assigned as the floating reserve, the SLF quickly came ashore two days into the operation as heavy fighting prompted the ground force commander to solicit the SLF to reinforce a multiple-battalion engagement. As in Operation STARLIGHT, the SLF moved ashore in amphibious assault craft and helicopters at the most critical time of the operation, blocking Vietcong forces from using escape routes. Fully committed to the battle vice returning to ships as the floating reserve, the SLF again proved its worth as a reliable force capable of exploiting success ashore as it became the decisive element in the defeat of the 1st Vietcong Regiment.¹⁹

As a result of SLF participation in large unit operations and the III MAF pacification plan, enemy activity in the ICTZ and northern IICTZ increased to ensure control of the populated areas and then drastically decreased due to significant contact throughout 1965.²⁰ The composition of North Vietnamese forces also changed to counter the large conventional

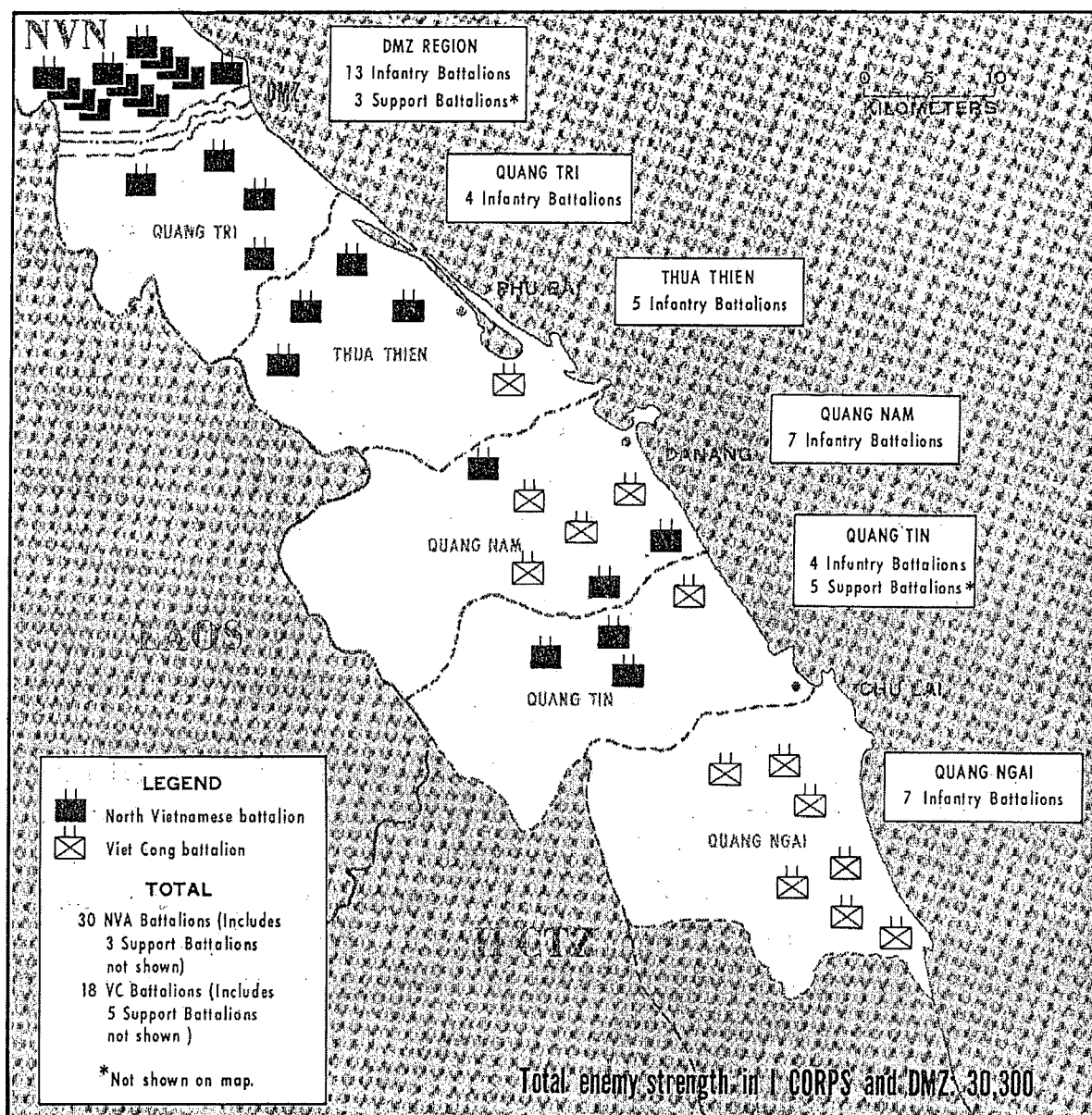
operations III MAF employed against the Vietcong. By the end of 1965, intelligence reports identified an increased NVA presence as a response to significant Vietcong losses in the ICTZ.²¹

1966: LARGE UNIT OPERATIONS AND THE SECOND FRONT

An Amphibious Doctrine in Vietnam

By early 1966, SLF operations were proving to be a resounding success. As the build up of III MAF and USMACV forces continued, North Vietnam began planning for the next phase of infiltrations across the DMZ in 1966. Representatives from CINCPACFLT, FMFPac, and USMACV routinely held joint planning and validation conferences to ensure the appropriate application of amphibious forces, including the SLF, remained a priority. A conference in May 1966 resulted in the acceptance of the *Application of Amphibious Doctrine in Vietnam* which detailed but was not limited to, amphibious force application procedures, command and planning relationships, and operational responsibilities.²² The conference and published results also concluded that the changing nature of the enemy rendered the original SLF concept "too narrow in scope" and in need of thorough review and evaluation.²³

Operations STARLIGHT and HARVEST MOON validated the utility of the SLF throughout 1965 and 1966 and provided excellent examples of how to tailor amphibious operations to meet the demands of the war. With the infiltration of several NVA divisions throughout the ICTZ, III MAF began planning for SLF support for large unit operations. (See Figure 6) Supporting pacification operations and raids along the coast would continue through the next year, but at a lower priority. The effects of this change in mission would influence the NVA's ability to wage a conventional war near the DMZ, and provide the Vietcong with an opportunity to return to the contested littorals.



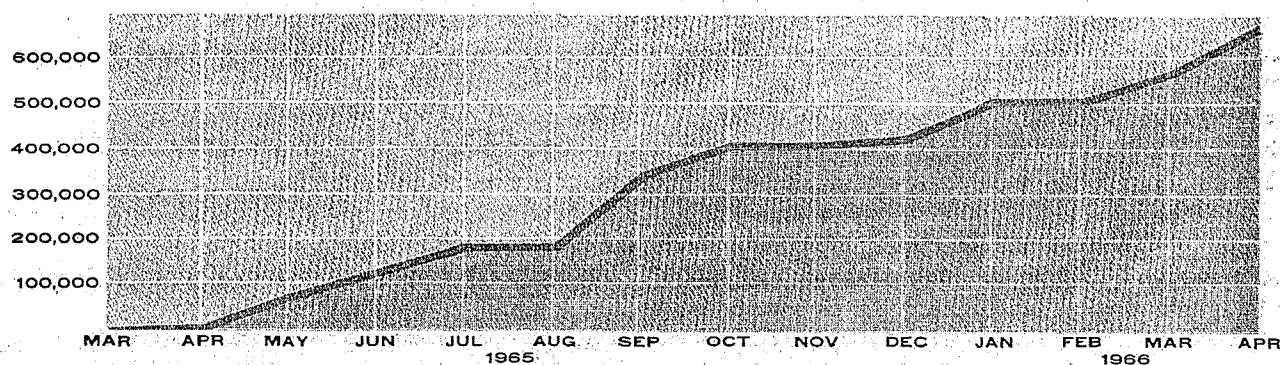
Map courtesy of the Archives and Special Collections, Library of the Marine Corps

Figure 6: Map of Vietcong and NVA Battalions in the ICTZ, 1966

Favorable Results

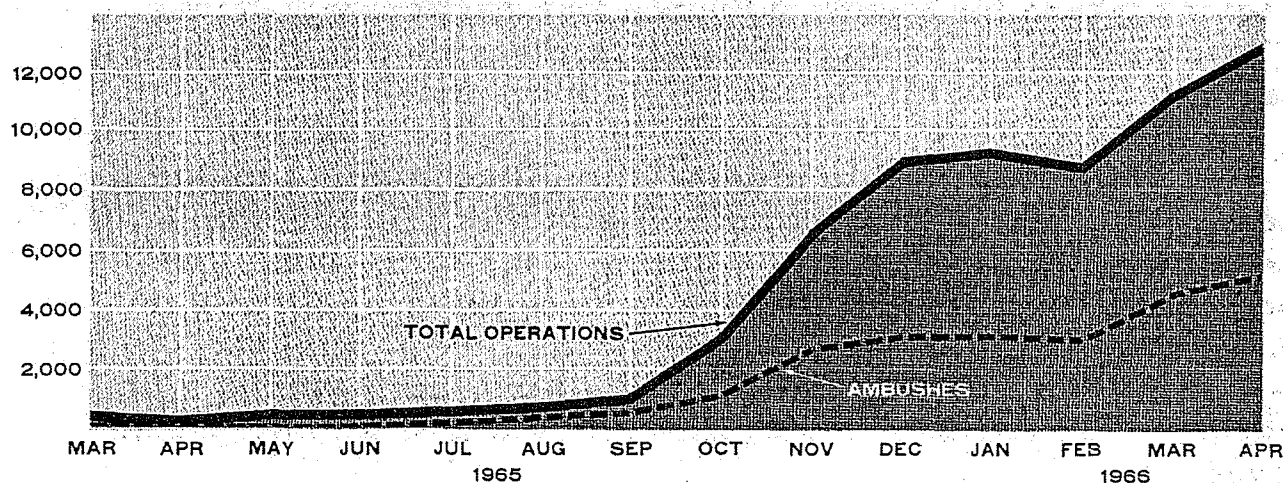
In the first year of SLF operations, friendly pockets of the South Vietnamese population in III MAF's area of operation grew from 100,000 to well over 600,000.²⁴ Several factors contributed to the increase, the first being that the increases in both offensive operations and pacification programs were gaining support in numerous villages and enclaves through the ICTZ. Government-sponsored population resettlement programs also afforded the South Vietnamese an

opportunity to move to less inhabited areas. III MAF operations to disrupt Vietcong infiltration and intimidation in the areas villagers refused to vacate included the SLF. Resettlement programs, coupled with increased enemy activity in the IICTZ, convinced the population to relocate to more secure and protected areas. With heavy enemy losses in the southern ICTZ in 1965, the population found refuge within the former Vietcong strongholds along the coast. The increase in population in a particular area brought an increase in enemy activity to counter III MAF pacification operations and to regain support for the communist uprising and revolution.



Graph courtesy of the Archives and Special Collections, Library of the Marine Corps

Figure 7: Population increase in the III MAF Area of Operations



Graph courtesy of the Archives and Special Collections, Library of the Marine Corps

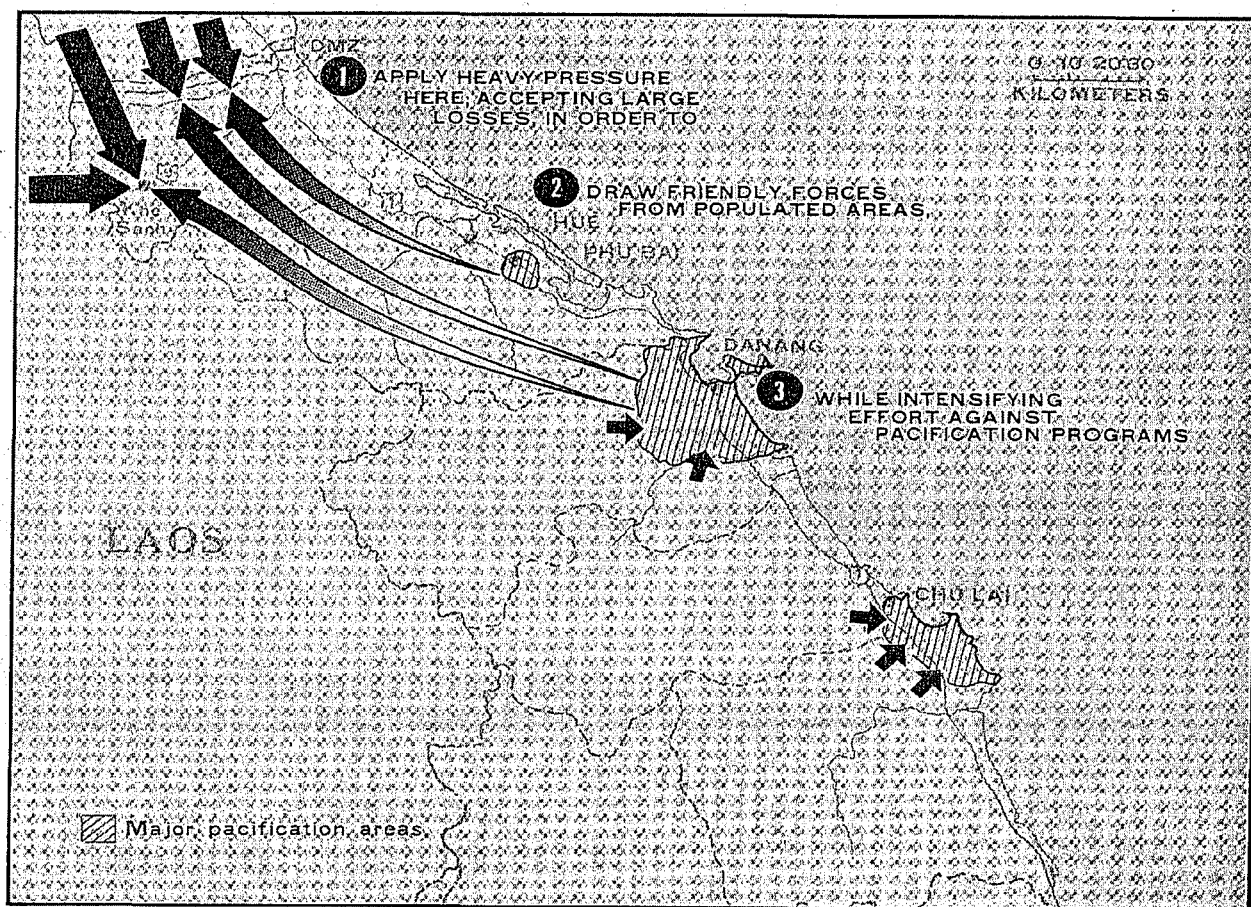
Figure 8: III MAF Offensive and Counterinsurgency Operations

As with the DAGGER THRUST series, III MAF understood the potential advantages of using the SLF as the primary force to execute a new series of amphibious operations as part of the large unit operation concept. A new series of operations entitled DECKHOUSE would continue the trend of providing a mobile amphibious force to transit the coast in support of large unit operations throughout three of the four corps tactical zones. DECKHOUSE, which had much to do with General Westmoreland's displeasure with Major General Walt's insistence on prioritizing a small unit-based pacification plan over conventional operations, centered on regiment and division-sized operations against Vietcong and NVA base camps to achieve a decisive victory similar to Operations STARLIGHT and HARVEST MOON. Although raids and the floating reserve remained the primary SLF and task group mission, large unit operations continued to dominate the next three years, predicated on the increasing lethality and size of enemy forces. DECKHOUSE reflected a changing enemy, III MAF's execution of the war, and SLF operations in support of the war.

The Enemy's New Face

The Vietcong and NVA, eager to regain lost resources and support in the IICTZ, initiated two operational adjustments to their planned uprising and revolution to counter III MAF's presence along the populated coastal areas. Known as the Second Front, this plan compensated for staggering Vietcong losses in the III MAF's combined counterinsurgency and large unit operations campaign. (See Figure 9) The initial phase of the Second Front called for the deployment of several NVA infantry divisions across the DMZ, supported by artillery battalions firing from positions north of Ben Hai River bordering the DMZ. In anticipation of III MAF confronting these forces, the Vietcong could then reinsert forces into the populated areas of the southern ICTZ and northern IICTZ as the Marines moved toward the DMZ.²⁵ Willing to accept heavy losses in the northern ICTZ to prevent III MAF's interference with Vietcong counter

pacification operations around Da Nang and Chu Lai, the Second Front significantly changed the dynamics of the war as an increased NVA's presence forced the change in the priority of III MAF's mission from a counterinsurgency to conventional war.²⁶ It also demonstrated North Vietnam's ability to wage a balanced campaign of conventional operations with a popularly supported insurgency.

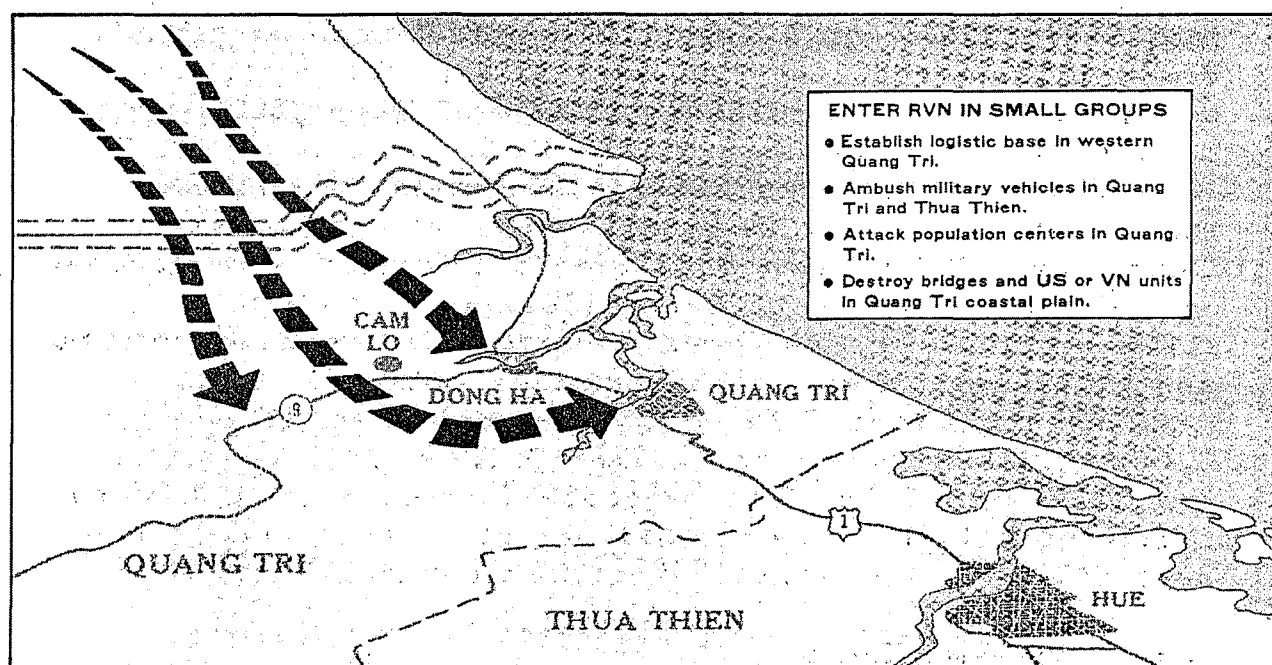


Map courtesy of the Archives and Special Collections, Library of the Marine Corps

Figure 9: Vietcong and NVA Second Front in the ICTZ, 1966

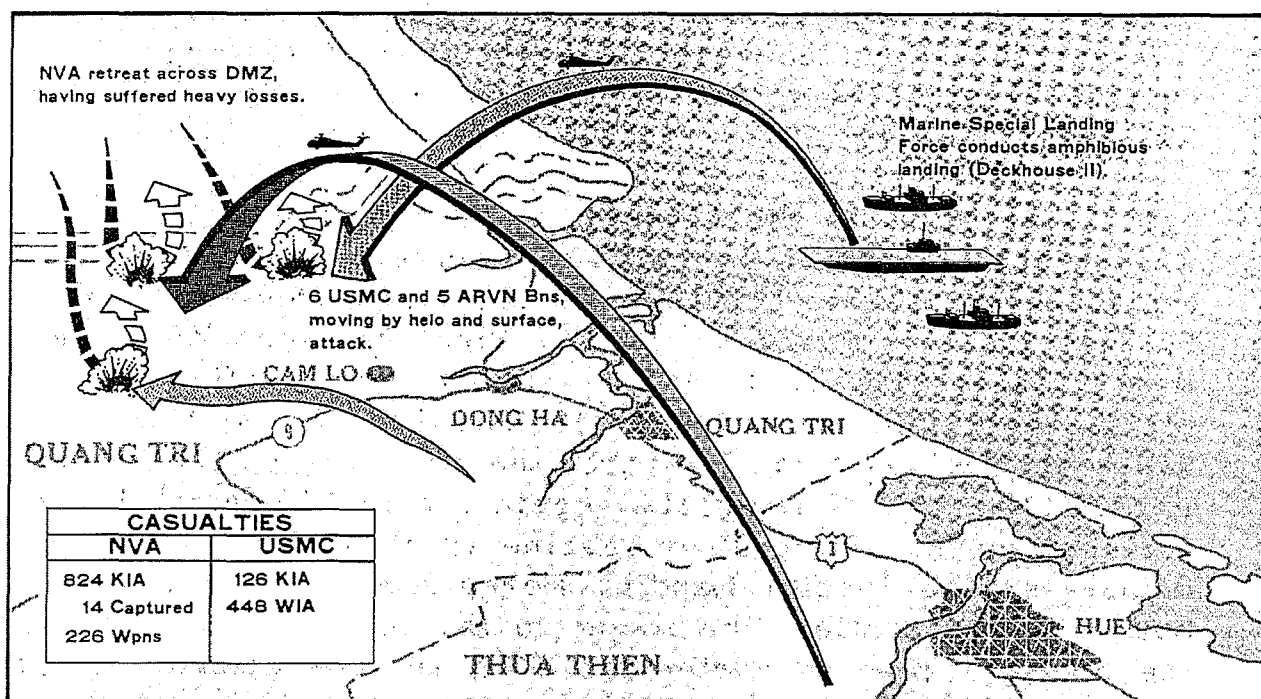
In June 1966, Operation DECKHOUSE brought III MAF back to the Qui Nhon area in pursuit of the Vietcong forces attempting to re-establish bases of operations in the IICTZ. Returning to the ICTZ a month later, the first concerted effort made by III MAF to confront the buildup of NVA forces near the DMZ came as a supporting effort to the largest operation

executed by Marines since arriving in South Vietnam. The purpose of Operation HASTINGS was to find and destroy several NVA battalions infiltrating the DMZ to prevent further use of the DMZ to launch attacks into Quang Tri.²⁷ Indirectly supporting HASTINGS, the SLF came ashore as the main effort to Operation DECKHOUSE II to block NVA escape routes from the HASTINGS area of operations. (See Figure 11) In September, the SLF executed Operation DECKHOUSE IV as an adjunct to Operation PRAIRIE, routing NVA forces rebuilding near Cam Lo. Both operational sequences, complimentary of the other, demonstrated the SLF's ability to conduct independent operations against conventional forces, increasing NVA losses while steadily reducing the number of enemy initiated attacks against III MAF.²⁸



Map courtesy of the Archives and Special Collections, Library of the Marine Corps

Figure 10: Operations HASTINGS/DECKHOUSE II, 1966 - Enemy Plan of Action



Map courtesy of the Archives and Special Collections, Library of the Marine Corps

Figure 11: Operations HASTINGS/DECKHOUSE II, 1966 - SLF and III MAF Counterattack

Toward the end of 1966, the SLF continued planning for large unit operations and enduring raids along the coast, as the more conventional campaign continued to take a heavy toll of North Vietnamese forces. Having undergone minor changes to command relationships, re-establishing amphibious planning and coordination guidelines across the services, and proving its utility as an independent element or supporting effort in a variety of operations, SLF amphibious operations remained the topic of heated debate within USMACV and III MAF.²⁹ For some III MAF leadership, SLF operations did not constitute a return to the amphibious character commonly found in Marine Corps history as SLF operations were considered “exploitations of an already existing battle situation”, due to the fact that they did not land across heavily defended beaches.³⁰ Instead, Marines came ashore by helicopter and inserted directly into the battle, or they were brought ashore by landing craft using sea lanes connected to river estuaries leading further inland.

According to the III MAF Operations Officer, Colonel John R. Chaisson, SLF operations "by and large were sort of contrived. It was almost a concept looking for a home."³¹ This flawed assessment does not take into account the flexibility that modern amphibious operations can provide, particularly since the advent of helicopter technology, which enabled amphibious forces to launch beyond enemy observation from ship to objective. As SLF operations along the populated coastline pushed the Vietcong further inland, the ability to conduct heliborne amphibious operations beyond the beach zone became that much more critical to maintain operational tempo against attacking or fleeing Vietcong and NVA forces.

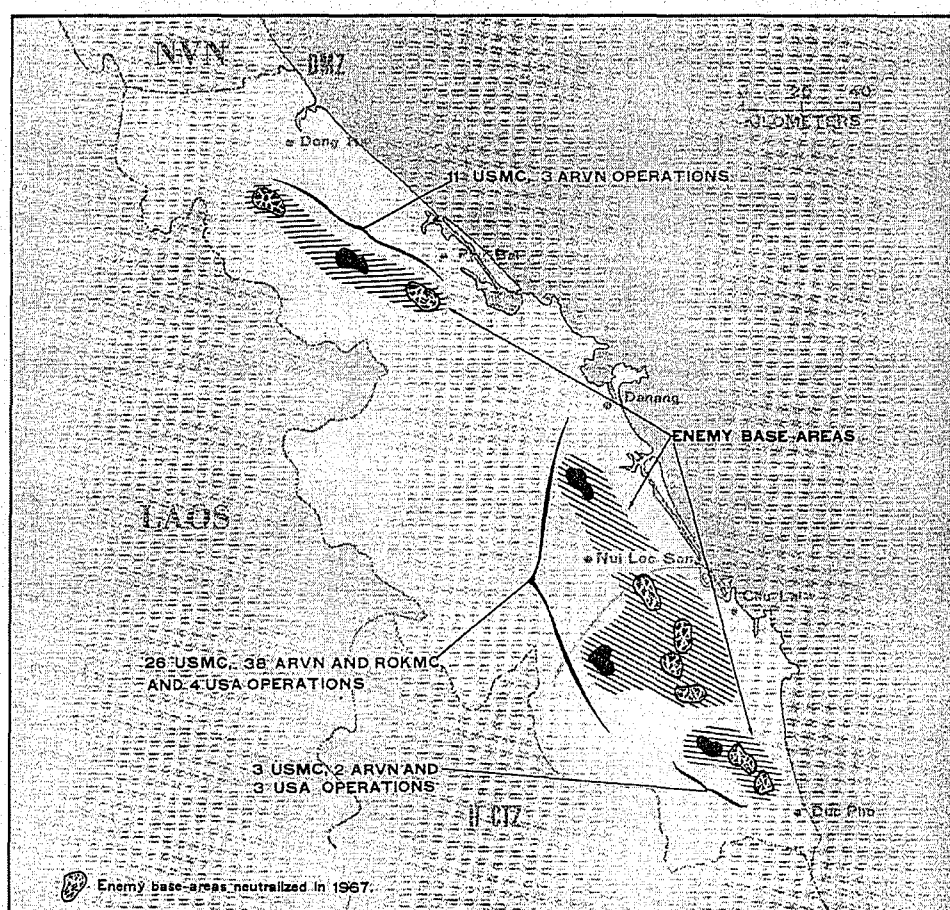
1967: NEUTRALIZING THE VIETCONG AND FIGHTING THE NVA

Attacking the Enemy's Center of Gravity

The SLF entered 1967 anticipating the same mobile contingency tasks as the previous two years. The SLF did just that, carrying out Operation DECKHOUSE V in the IVCTZ and the Mekong Delta. However, due to the increasing demand for additional Marines in Quang Tri to confront the NVA, this would be the last SLF operation to be executed outside the ICTZ, much to the dismay of General Westmoreland.³² As in past SLF operations, the targets were Vietcong control points and concentration areas along the populated coast. The operation, although successful in terms of disrupting Vietcong influence in the area, had its share of problems, such as the control of aircraft in support of amphibious operations outside the ICTZ. According to amphibious doctrine, all aircraft supporting amphibious operations fall under the control of the naval commander of the amphibious task force. However, the Seventh Air Force, which controlled all air operations in the Mekong Delta, believed that even during an amphibious operation, it should retain control.³³ Although General Westmoreland concurred with the Navy and assigned control of air operations to the ARG, to avoid future problems amphibious operations thereafter remained inside the ICTZ. Future conferences resolved air control

problems and served as a reminder to the Seventh Fleet, USMACV, III MAF, and Seventh Air Force that continuous coordination between the services was paramount during the planning phase of amphibious operations, regardless of current standing operating procedures.³⁴

III MAF's focus of effort throughout much of 1967 was the neutralization of Vietcong and NVA base areas and the attrition of the Vietcong and NVA forces by introducing Marines into enemy occupied enclaves for significantly longer periods to draw the Vietcong and NVA into decisive engagements.³⁵ (See Figure 12)



ENEMY KILLED IN BASE AREA NEUTRALIZATION OPERATIONS - 1967

JAN - FEB	MAR - APR	MAY - JUN	JUL - AUG	SEP - OCT	NOV - DEC	TOTAL
1,705	1,470	3,244	1,532	2,818	1,856	12,625

Altogether, 13,511 enemy were killed in base area neutralization operations in 1967. This includes 886 (not reflected in figures above) killed by Marine reconnaissance teams operating in these areas.

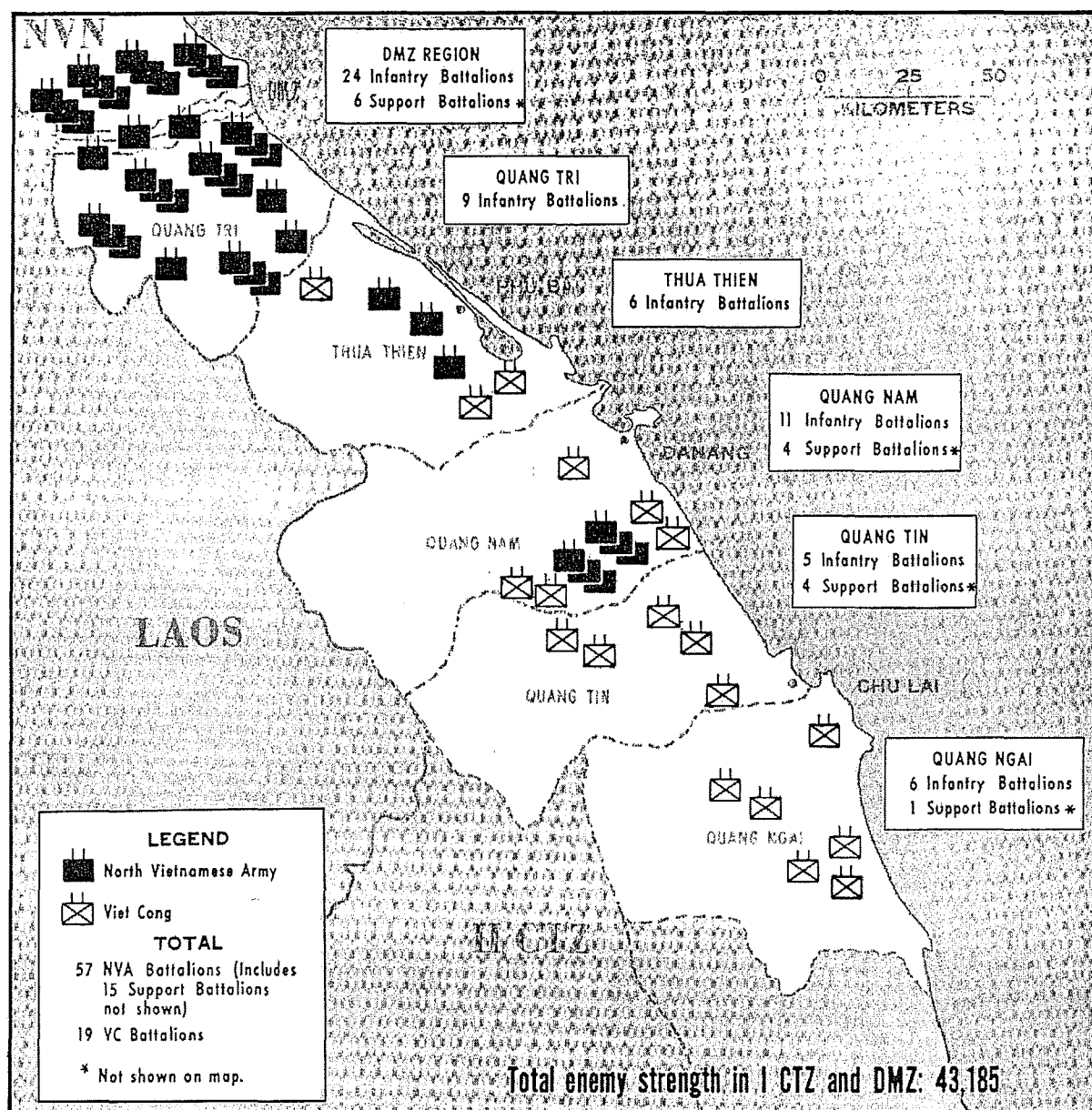
Map and graph courtesy of the Archives and Special Collections, Library of the Marine Corps

Figure 12: Neutralization Operations against Vietcong and NVA Base Areas, 1967

Like SLF targets in 1965 and 1966, these base areas consisted of multi-layered bunker complexes, which provided command and control and logistical support. Base areas were often the scene of the more intense battles. Operations similar to DECKHOUSE VI, which succeeded in killing 201 Vietcong, uncovered 167 fortifications, and more than 20 tons of supplies during the month of February alone, achieved the desired neutralization of enemy forces and base areas for a significant period.³⁶ The neutralization effort became a costly problem for enemy forces as SLF and large unit operations greatly reduced Vietcong presence among the South Vietnamese people and the NVA's ability to maintain sustained conventional operations far beyond the DMZ throughout the year.

A Second SLF

One of the more significant changes to the SLF concept came in April of 1967. As a result of increased large unit operations and the need to provide additional forces in South Vietnam, the Joint Chiefs of Staff directed the creation of a second SLF with the understanding that both were to be committed "to extended operations in Vietnam."³⁷ Lieutenant General Walt (promoted in June 1966) immediately laid the groundwork for the second SLF, creating habitual relationships by aligning SLF-A with the 3d Marine Division, which typically operated north of Hue City to the DMZ, and SLF-B with the 1st Marine Division operating from Hue City to areas south of Da Nang.³⁸ The majority of the changes reflected III MAF's reaction to intelligence reports profiling an alarming NVA buildup north of the DMZ and throughout northern ICTZ. (See Figure 13) With SLF-A and SLF-B available, III MAF and USMACV increased the operational tempo by increasing adjunct SLF and large unit operations, thus continuing the trend of reducing enemy-initiated attacks.³⁸ In June, Lieutenant General Robert E. Cushman replaced Walt. Cushman, a proponent of the SLF program, looked to re-establish the SLF concept and amphibious operations at the soonest available opportunity.



Map courtesy of the Archives and Special Collections, Library of the Marine Corps

Figure 13: Map of Vietcong and NVA Battalions in the ICTZ, 1967

Throughout the second half of 1967, the SLFs routinely completed one operation and immediately began another without returning to the ARG due to the need to exploit success against a neutralized enemy force or to reinforce Marines elsewhere. In July, both SLFs landed to support Operation BUFFALO after Marines uncovered a large NVA force moving across the DMZ, which eventually led to one of the bloodiest battles of the conflict.³⁹ After two weeks of

brutal fighting, both SLFs returned to the ARG and prepared for the next phase of sustained operations ashore near the DMZ. Operation BUFFALO became the norm for the SLF in 1967, with no change in sight for 1968.

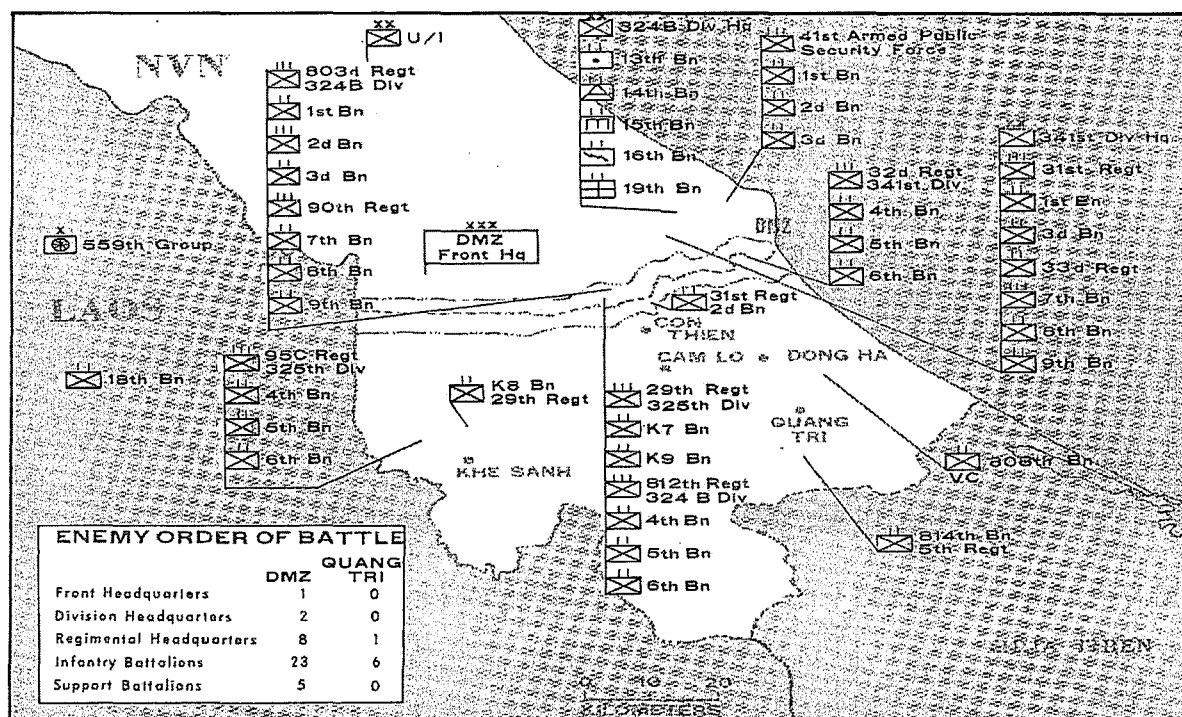
For nearly two years, the SLF served as an essential element in III MAF's pacification campaign to neutralize the Vietcong's control over the population. On a conventional scale, the SLF did more than augment or reinforce III MAF units in contact with the NVA. SLF participation in large unit operations accounted for several of III MAF's more decisive actions against the NVA along the DMZ during this period. The combined III MAF-SLF operational tempo along the DMZ and throughout the Quang Tri province forced the NVA to increase its conventional efforts to reduce III MAF's combat power throughout the entire province. Halting advance elements of several NVA divisions in 1966 and 1967, the SLF inflicted numerous casualties throughout the highly contested province and disrupted any momentum the NVA and Vietcong hoped to achieve along the border and on the coast. A critical element of the SLF's success was its responsiveness, due in part to its air-ground task organization. Whereas III MAF's land-based infantry battalions and assault-support helicopter squadrons could respond in kind, the cohesive relationship between the SLF's air-ground components significantly reduced response time. Positioned aboard ARG shipping, the SLF also retained a greater measure of surprise.

1968: HIGH OPERATIONAL TEMPO AND LOGISTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Extended Operations Ashore

By January 1968, III MAF intelligence reported three NVA divisions operating in central and western Quang Tri Province or along the DMZ. (See Figure 14) The divisions comprised of more than thirty infantry and artillery battalions with six support battalions (trucks, engineers, and communications) to facilitate operations, double the number of NVA committed to the war

less than two years earlier.⁴⁰ An increase in the coastal areas, however, did not occur. Like the previous three years of infiltrations, the NVA shifted infiltration efforts to the rugged interior mountainous region bordering Laos. Intense engagements along the border and the DMZ continued to draw the SLF ashore for lengthier periods, reducing the effectiveness of a proven amphibious capability.



Map courtesy of the Archives and Special Collections, Library of the Marine Corps

Figure 14: NVA Order of Battle in the Quang Tri Province, 1968

Following Operation BUFFALO, both SLFs underwent a significant rehabilitation period as losses to personnel and equipment were high. Activity around the Khe Sanh Valley kept III MAF busy assessing NVA intentions, although it was clear an attack on the Khe Sanh Combat Base was imminent.⁴¹ Although SLF-A and SLF-B remained at sea to respond to either Khe Sanh or any number of flashpoints in Quang Tri, the ongoing redistribution of forces in the ICTZ, particularly at Khe Sanh and near Cam Lo, brought both SLFs ashore from late January until mid June.⁴²

Extended operations ashore did very little for the development of the SLF concept in 1968. They did, however, highlight a critical shortfall in logistical support for SLF operations. Exacerbated by a logistics system developed to support the SLF's original mission, committing both SLFs to combat operations ashore further complicated the situation. Previous to the SLF's participation in large unit operations, ground and aviation elements provided their own logistical support when not operating aboard ships or within areas accessible to III MAF logistics bases at Dong Ha and Chu Lai.⁴³ To resolve the problem, III MAF and CINCPACFLT implemented new policies pertaining to SLF support. Although new procedures for supporting the SLF were published by Lieutenant General Walt 1967, III MAF took the necessary action to ensure compliance.⁴⁴ According to Walt's order, the SLF "when operating in areas isolated from established logistics support areas, ground units of the SLF utilize their own resources, with stocks reconstituted as practicable from the Force Logistics Command...if operations ashore extend beyond 15 days, support of helicopters will become the responsibility of CG, III MAF."⁴⁵

Status Quo

With extended operations ashore and subsequent logistical support changes, the SLF "became part of III MAF for the next few months", raising CINCPACFLT's concerns over SLF reconstitution and employment practices.⁴⁶ Senior Navy, Army, and Marine officers revisited the interoperability and operational dilemma of 1965 as both SLFs remained ashore for an extended time. The Navy, concerned with long-term use of the SLF ashore, insisted that current employment patterns were greatly reducing CINCPACFLT's ability to strike elsewhere in the Pacific. Marine counterparts such as Major General Rathvon McC. Tompkins, Commanding General, 3^d Marine Division, sided against the Navy, stating that it was "better to have two battalions ashore than two battalions floating around, looking at each other."⁴⁷ Lieutenant General Cushman emphasized the role of the SLF and directed that the battalions and aviation

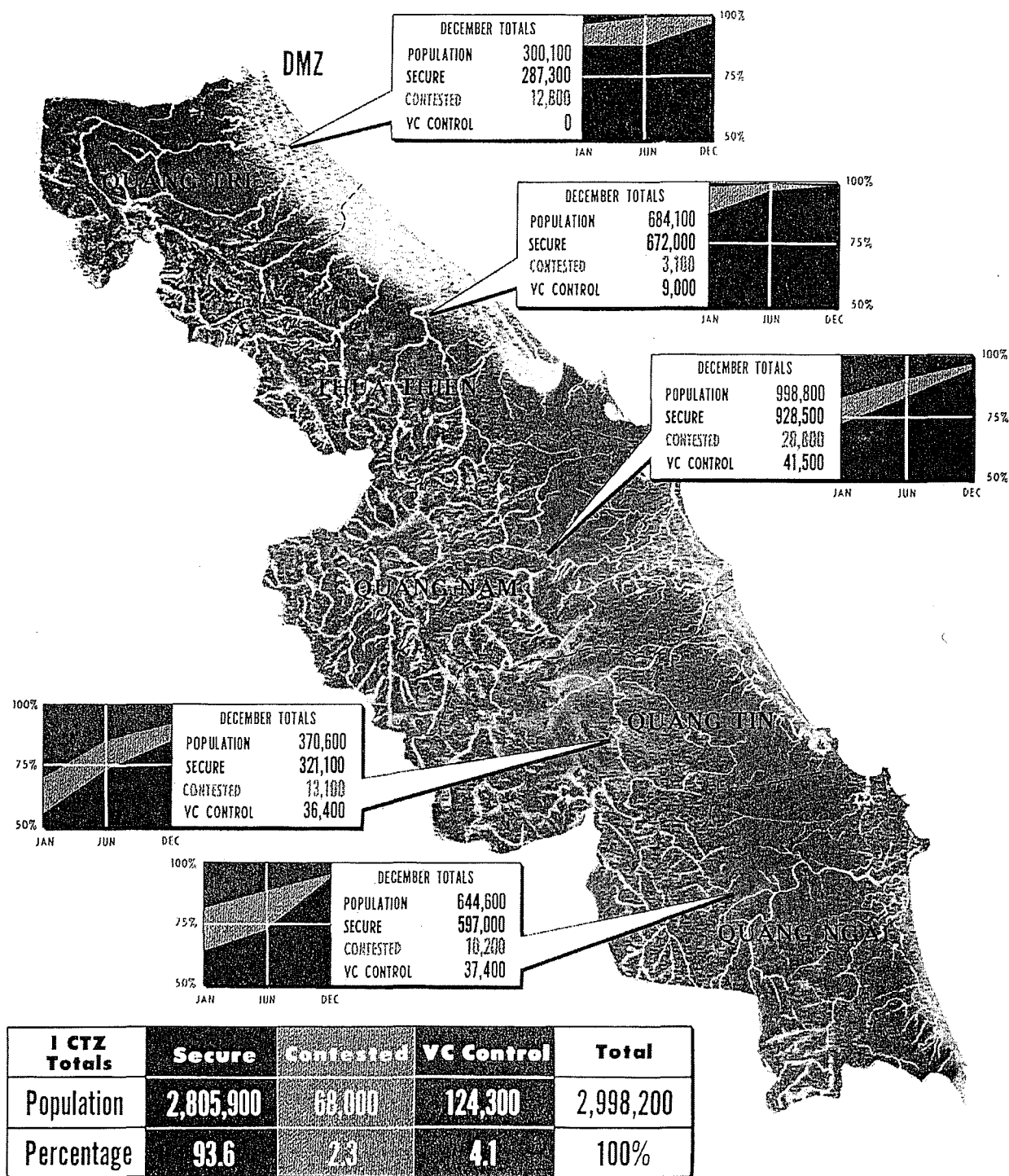
squadrons assigned to the SLF remain with the ARG as their original intended use was “against time sensitive targets” and that the basis for the SLF’s employment “be on best III MAF intelligence estimates.”⁴⁸ Near the end of the year, both SLFs returned to the ARG and commenced a series of small amphibious operations along the coast. Still supporting large operations ashore, the unresolved issues surrounding the SLF continued into 1969.

1969: RETURN TO THE SEA AND OPERATIONAL ASSESSMENTS

Déjà vu

On the ground, 1969 looked to be yet another year of intense fighting and high operational tempo. III MAF intelligence estimates nearly doubled the strength of NVA and Vietcong battalions in the ICTZ from the previous year.⁴⁹ Pacification estimates were getting attention at the highest levels, and for good reason. (See Figure 15) The total population growth in areas under III MAF control and security tripled while the percentage of the population still under Vietcong control dropped to less than five percent.⁵⁰ Within SLF target areas along the coast, population pacification levels were well over ninety percent secure, an increase since late 1968 when the SLF vacated the coastal areas and participated in months of operations along the DMZ.⁵¹ Nonetheless, security levels returned to pre-1968 levels and steadily improved throughout the remainder of the year with the return of the SLF. At sea, as both SLFs prepared for limited operations ashore, pacification operations returned to the forefront in spite of an increased enemy presence along the DMZ.

Lieutenant General Cushman’s vision of maximizing all available forces to achieve complementary effects included the increased use of the SLF. One such operation was Operation BOLD MARINER, the largest operation in support of III MAF’s 1969 combined combat and pacification campaign and the largest amphibious landing since Inchon in 1950.⁵²



Map and graphs courtesy of the Archives and Special Collections, Library of the Marine Corps

Figure 15: Pacification Status in the ICTZ, 1969

Under BOLD MARINER, both SLFs came ashore south of Chu Lai in the Quang Ngai Province, the southern-most province in the ICTZ. BOLD MARINER marked the first significant III MAF

presence in the area in over a year, an area with nearly 50,000 South Vietnamese citizens either under complete control of the Vietcong or nearing submission to the 38th Vietcong Main Force Regiment.⁵³

Operation BOLD MARINER, although producing little enemy contact, was the first of several successive operations in the two remaining Vietcong-dominated provinces of Quang Ngai and Quang Tin. Aimed at securing the population base and backfilling gaps during III MAF's repositioning of forces prior to Tet, the renewed focus on pacification operations came on the heels of the 3^d Marine Division's redeployment to Okinawa. BOLD MARINER also continued the lengthy operational debate that resurfaced at the end of 1968. However, the SLF returned to the ARG each time to conduct rehabilitation training at sea or until called back to support III MAF operations.

Varying Opinions

Midway through 1969, General Creighton W. Abrams, General Westmoreland's successor, attempted to return the SLF to its original purpose by stressing the importance of the SLF and ARG as a theater asset, not just an asset used in the III MAF controlled northern provinces, and that the most judicious use of amphibious capabilities was to make the SLFs accessible throughout the entire operational area. In contrast, Lieutenant General Herman Nickerson, Jr., Cushman's replacement, saw little benefit in employing the SLF outside III MAF's area of operations and insisted the SLF remain ashore vice at sea. In response to Abrams' request to refine the SLF's employment criteria CINCPACFLT reiterated the restrictions levied on III MAF and USMACV for the employment and application of the SLF and reminded both commands of the requirement for the justifiable use of naval forces off the coast of South Vietnam.

Abrams' determination led to increased disagreements between all parties, particularly within the Okinawa-based 9th MEB, which provided the infantry battalions and helicopters for the SLF. Colonel Clyde Hunter, the 9th MEB Operations Officer, believed the SLF "was being misused" and that subordinate commands were "actually ginning up operations just to get them ashore and then tie them down to a TAOR, or into some kind of operation, that had no connection to their mission as an SLF."⁵⁴ In related argument the 9th MEB Chief of Staff, Colonel John Lowman, Jr. stated that as long as the SLFs remained ashore for extended periods it was "hard for the Navy to justify the expense of keeping under-utilized amphibious shipping hanging off the Vietnamese coast."⁵⁵ While the Navy maintained its position, III MAF continued to argue that too much time at sea adversely influenced operations ashore and that any Marine not operating ashore did not constitute the best utilization of available forces.

The final SLF operation in South Vietnam brought about a significant reduction of capabilities ashore and in support of the overall operational campaign against North Vietnam. At the conclusion of Operation DEFIANT STAND in September 1969, the SLF reverted to its primary role as a strategic reserve force to reduce the total number of forces operating in Vietnam. From this point on, only the Joint Chiefs of Staff could approve the use of the SLF adding, "enemy offensive of major proportions would have to be launched before imminent reintroduction [of the SLFs into Vietnam] would even be considered."⁵⁶ The SLF remained prepared for employment ashore by conducting training exercises around the Pacific region and maintaining a 4-day reaction posture to support COMUSMACV in addition to the standard 7-day requirement anywhere in the Pacific.⁵⁷

CONCLUSION

The SLF's amphibious capabilities reduced the Vietcong's control over the coastal population, prevented the North Vietnamese Army from exploiting tactical success, and

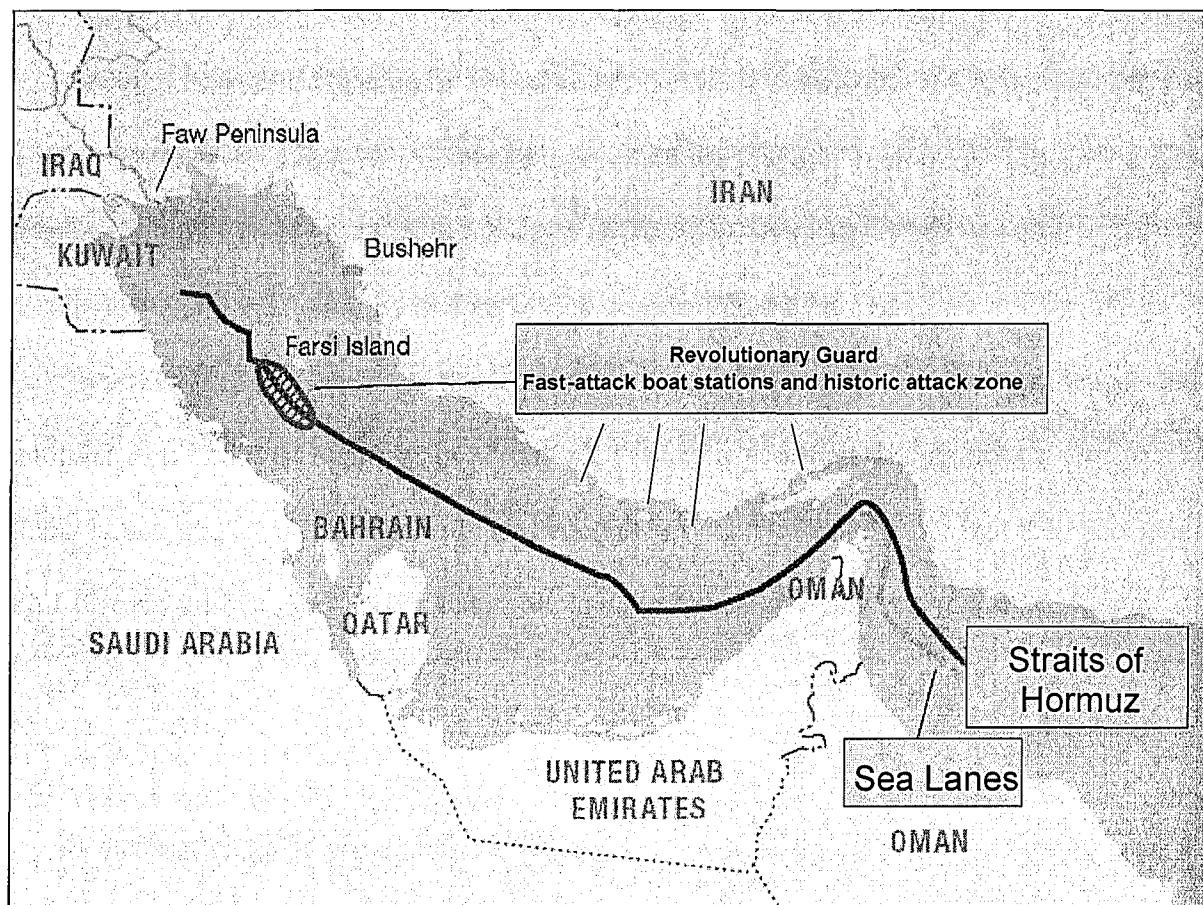
disrupted the North Vietnamese Army and Vietcong's freedom of action in South Vietnam. In Lieutenant Colonel Peter L. Hilgartner's article "Amphibious Operations in Vietnam," he asserts that the Marine Corps viewed employing amphibious operations with contempt due to a "lack of understanding of amphibious doctrine coupled with impatience over the prosecution of the war."⁵⁸ Nevertheless, it does not detract from the fact that amphibious operations conducted by the SLF from 1965 to 1969 complemented III MAF and USMACV naval and ground campaigns more than originally anticipated. If nothing else, SLF renewed the doctrinal art of amphibious warfare, yet on a grander scale, its absence would have greatly reduced General Westmoreland's campaign success.

Contrary to the portrayal of the war, SLF heliborne and surface assault amphibious operations played a significant role throughout this period, adding depth and responsiveness to a time sensitive environment and against a fluid enemy force. While the services argued the utility and value of SLF operations throughout the war, they could not refute its contribution to defeating Vietcong and NVA forces. The focused use of the SLF along the populated coast for limited and extended periods allowed III MAF to retain the initiative in the heaviest contested areas. As part of III MAF's pacification campaign the SLF's presence provided enduring security for the people by augmenting III MAF with a mobile force capable of interdicting Vietcong forces and supplies on a moment's notice.

In support of combat operations, the SLF provided great tactical flexibility for the operational commander by generating operational momentum, regardless of the assigned tactical task, and disrupting enemy freedom of action by keeping Vietcong and NVA forces off balance throughout the entire area of operations. Lieutenant General Cushman, an avid proponent of the program commented that the concentrated use of the SLF during this period "added that extra punch" to reinforce success or turn the tide of a battle.⁵⁹ In either capacity, the SLF

demonstrated its versatility in support of sustained operations ashore. For the better part of 1966 and all of 1967 and 1968, the SLF remained committed to large unit operations while at the same time maintaining its ability to transition back to pacification operations when necessary. No other unit can claim the flexibility and versatility demonstrated by the SLF.

In terms of current operational relevance, understanding the operational significance and capabilities of the SLF is equally as important when planning for potential conflicts. One example is Iran and its vast border with the Persian Gulf, which would imply that the Navy and Marine Corps team will play a significant role in any military action in this region.



Map courtesy of the Office of the Chief of Naval Operations

Figure 16: Map of Persian Gulf and Iranian Coast

Aside from amphibious landings in support of ground combat operations, possible scenarios for the SLF against Iran include keeping the sole entry point into the Persian Gulf open, raids on coastal anti-shipping missile batteries, and seizing Iranian Revolutionary Guard fast-attack boat stations, which were critical to Iranian naval operations against United States Navy ships escorting Kuwaiti oil tankers in the Persian Gulf from 1987 to 1988.⁶⁰ Employment of the SLF against fast-attack boats stationed at gas and oil platforms and several small coastal bases on the Iranian mainland or on Farsi Island would negate Iranian freedom of action and control of vital sea-lanes, particularly through the Straits of Hormuz. Denying Iran this capability would reduce its tactical and operational advantage over United States naval forces. Regardless of the location and adversary, studying the lessons learned from SLF operations in South Vietnam could provide the United States' Joint Force Commander with the needed depth and mobility across a designated area of operations, as well as providing the added flexibility and striking power to complement the land and naval campaign design and the overall strategy ashore.

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